SCORING ESSINGTON
Composition, Comprovisation, Collaboration

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Abstract

New music technologies have increasingly enabled elements of improvised score to be incorporated into screen music tracks, even where a score is devised for performance by orchestral ensembles. This article focuses on the music construction for a film produced for (colour) television in the first decade of the Australian cinema revival period. In 1974 the author collaborated with composers Peter Sculthorpe and David Matthews on the production of the music score for the Australian feature-length drama, Essington (Julian Pringle, 1974). This reflective practice article outlines the creative ideas behind the composition of the Essington score and focuses on comprovisation (composition involving improvisation) as distinct from then-common practice in film scoring of fully notating the underscore. In scoring Essington's music, comprovised cues, produced mostly using unconventional piano 'interior' sounds (where the sounds are produced by direct contact with the strings rather than using the keyboard), were used to sonically contrast with fully notated cues written in a conventional way for the piano. This study analyses a collaborative approach that offers a useful model for contemporary (Australian) film composition practices.

Keywords
Australian film music, Peter Sculthorpe, improvisation, comprovisation, piano interior

Introduction

Essington, a television feature film made by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) for the introduction of colour television\(^1\), is an historical drama written by well-established historical novelist Thomas Keneally, directed by Julian Pringle and produced by Brian Burke. Essington's storyline centres on the difficulties faced by British colonial settlers in coping with the harshness and strangeness of the Australian continent in the 1840s. It was one of the first Australian films to tackle the negative impact of European colonialism on the indigenous population. Keneally’s screenplay dealt critically with issues affecting indigenous peoples such as: the introduction of diseases like influenza, dysentery, and sexually transmitted diseases; the imposition of Western cultural practices such as religion and law; and, generally, the display of culturally insensitive behaviour by the settlers. First broadcast on ABC TV on March 6, 1974, Essington gained industry recognition in the 1976 Logie Awards: Keneally won Best Script and Chris Haywood won Best

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\(^1\) Colour television was officially launched in Australia on March 1, 1975, although several test transmissions and productions were available through 1974.
Individual Performance by an Actor (for the part of Squires). Significant musical resources were directed to this film that was designed to highlight a new era of TV transmissions in Australia.

Peter Sculthorpe, then a highly-regarded Australian chamber, orchestral and music theatre composer, was invited to score *Essington*. The producer was expecting an orchestral score and had organised the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (at the time managed by the ABC) to record it. Sculthorpe, however, was not interested in writing for orchestra and negotiated with the ABC to be able to compose piano keyboard music combined with layered piano interior (or ‘extended techniques’) textures in the recording studio using multi-track technology. Sculthorpe felt there was not enough time allowed to compose a fully orchestrated score (Skinner, 2007: 634) and that, “Television doesn’t necessarily require large musical forces” (Sculthorpe, 1999: 207). Even for feature films for theatrical release he had previously written scores for small instrumental combinations: for the children’s drama *They Found a Cave* (Andrew Steane, 1962) he used a light jazz ensemble featuring American virtuoso harmonica soloist Larry Adler, and for the romantic comedy, *Age of Consent* (Michael Powell, 1969), he employed an ensemble of wind quintet, harp, vibraphone, cello and double bass, ideal for his gamelan-influenced musical style in this period.

The decision to incorporate extended piano techniques into the *Essington* score coalesced with techniques and textures that had featured in some of Sculthorpe’s concert music in the early 1970s, for example, he had written *Landscape* for amplified piano and tape delay (1971) and *Koto Music* for amplified piano and tape loop (1973) for the Australian concert pianist Roger Woodward. Both these works incorporated piano interior textures such as plucking and stroking the strings, as well as improvised elements. In addition Sculthorpe had written for piano interior as part of the orchestra for his theatre work, *Rites of Passage* (1972-73), which premiered in September 1974. The idea of working with piano interior techniques in a multi-track recording environment for *Essington* presented the opportunity to create unique textural sonorities using an experimental approach rather than producing an entirely notated score for conventional instruments.

Sculthorpe’s decision to invite David Matthews and I to collaborate with him on the *Essington* score was driven by his need to share the workload for completing the score in a short time. 1974 was an extremely busy year for Sculthorpe. Matthews had been sent to Australia by Sculthorpe’s UK publisher, Faber Music Limited, to assist Sculthorpe with preparing the score and parts of *Rites of Passage*, and he also copied the score of *The Song of Tailitnama*, the first performance of which was filmed in May 1974 (Skinner, 2007: 636) as part of a documentary *Sun Music for Film* (Stafford Garner, 1974). Apart from doing editorial work for publishers and composers, Matthews already had a strong profile as a professional concert composer in 1974, and is now a major figure in British and European contexts.

For my part, I had worked as Sculthorpe’s composition assistant at the time of his writing *Landscape*, and had previously developed a piano interior performance and improvisation practice based largely on my electro-acoustic music studio experiments as a University of Sydney music student from 1968. I had recorded piano interior improvisations onto tape and made tape collages using standard *musique concrète* techniques such as tape splicing, tape looping, tape-speed manipulation as well as layering using multi-track tape recorders.

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As a composer/academic I have employed practice-based methodology, a research approach that has recently garnered recognition for artist researchers for whom the primary research outcome—the production of new knowledge—is the creative work itself (see Knowles and Cole, 2008). I have applied this methodology using reflective (retrospective) analysis of a collaborative creative project in which I engaged early in my career as a composer/researcher. In addition, research for this article focuses on analysis of texts, including the film itself, and documents relating to the scoring of the music that are held in the manuscript collection of the National Library of Australia (NLA), in the Papers of Peter Sculthorpe (MS 9676). In this collection, the folder relating to the Essington film project includes the original manuscripts of the scores of piano cues written by Matthews and Sculthorpe, a few manuscripts of composition sketches, the music spotting notes, tracking notes that detail the multi-track layering of the compromised cues, and notes on the recording sessions at the Recording Hall of the Sydney Opera House. This article discusses the diegetic music cues, including the use of an Aboriginal song, and underscore, as well as the incorporation of improvisatory techniques.

Musical Approach to Essington

Essington is a fictionalised account of a British attempt in 1838 to establish a military and trading settlement at Port Essington on the Coburg Peninsula in what is now the Northern Territory. The story’s characters are the military personnel and their families, a gang of convicts engaged as labourers, a shipwrecked priest, and an Aboriginal tribe. One of the military objectives of the settlement, which took the form of an unrealistic border protection policy, was to prevent the French from establishing naval bases in the north of the continent. The settlement lasted only eleven years because of its failure to deal with the isolation and harsh conditions, for which the Europeans were inadequately equipped.

The film narrative commences at a point where the colonists are building their fifth government house from stone after the first four buildings had been destroyed by termites. The commandant, Captain Macarthur, is portrayed as becoming increasingly mentally deranged by his failure to cope with the expectations of his assignment to maintain the operational standards of the Royal Marines. He is also an insomniac, and makes nightly visits to the local Aboriginal camp, because the only way he can fall asleep is by listening to their songs that appear to have a hypnotic effect on him. He has formed a bond with the Aboriginal elder, Namankati. The other main character is Squires, a convict who, unlike his fellow inhabitants in then-Victoria (better known as Port Essington), demonstrates awareness of cultural and locational sensitivity, and is portrayed as being resourceful, talented and intelligent. Squires has learned to speak the local indigenous language, has superior understandings of aboriginal culture, and is not afraid to criticise his fellow convicts, the officers, the soldiers and the priest, if they do, or intend to do, something culturally inappropriate. Such cultural issues form a common thread in the film narrative.

Although the drama is a hard-hitting critique of British colonial attitudes and behaviour, Keneally’s script posed a problem for the scoring team when we first viewed the film in the company of the director and producer. At this point the film had dialogue and most of the sound effects, but no underscored music or even a ‘temp track’ (a temporary selection of recorded music commonly dubbed onto an early edit or rough cut of the film to assist the edit and give the composer an idea of
the required musical style). After a half-hour of viewing, it became evident that, while the subject matter was serious, the underlying treatment was often humorous in its emphasis on the ludicrous efforts of the military to maintain the cultural ‘standards’ of the British Empire in a tropical location.

While engaged in the viewing session we (the scoring team) were all (independently) afraid to laugh in case we offended the filmmakers. The incident highlighted the importance of music to remind the viewer how they should be interpreting the mood of the visual and spoken narrative. As Kathryn Kalinak puts it:

> Music’s dual function as both articulator of screen expression and initiator of spectator response binds the spectator to the screen by resonating affect between them. (1992: 87)

The idea of using quaint nineteenth century piano styles (described below) came from this identification of the humorous elements of the screenplay.

**Diegetic music cues**

*Essington* uses two different sources of diegetic music: Anglo/Celtic folk music and traditional Aboriginal music. These two musics are respectively emblematic of the two cultures: the new settlers and the Aboriginal people. One of the soldiers, Sgt. Masland, plays the harmonica in a number of scenes and the harmonica itself is central to the plot. The Aboriginal elder, Namankati, believes the harmonica has magical powers. Early in the story he is seen dancing enthusiastically to a folk tune, much to the amusement of Masland and some other soldiers; and later Namankati steals the harmonica, believing that if he plays it, it can cure the influenza that has fatally afflicted his tribe. He is subsequently arrested and shot dead by Masland as he tries to escape.

Recordings of four traditional Aboriginal songs are used for the three Aboriginal night-time camp scenes and a day-time mourning-for-the-dead scene. One of the tracks chosen by Sculthorpe was a song titled ‘The whistling duck, *djilili*, swimming in the billabong’, sourced from an LP of field recordings made by anthropologist, Professor AP Elkin (Arnhem Land Volume 3) (Sculthorpe and Hughes, 1998). This song was used diegetically for the first of the Aboriginal camp scenes. Sculthorpe decided to use the melody of this song as a central theme for the underscore of the film. The practice of using a diegetic music cue in a film as the basis for non-diegetic underscore ideas is not uncommon as a screen composition strategy. For example Lindley Evans’s underscore in the early Australian film *Tall Timbers* (Ken G. Hall, 1937) extensively uses the tune of the song ‘Trees’ (1914 poem by Joyce Kilmer; 1922 music by Oscar Rasbach) that is sung diegetically by the lead male character in one of the early scenes. More recently in various scenes of *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, 2008), the song ‘[Somewhere] Over the Rainbow’ (lyrics by EY Harburg; music by Harold Arlen, 1939) is performed diegetically and melodic elements of it also understatedly permeate David Hirschfelder’s underscore.

For *Essington*, the melody of ‘The whistling duck, *djilili*, swimming in the billabong’ was transcribed by me. I used this version of the tune in six of the twenty-three cues that I recorded. I use the word ‘recorded’ because, unlike the piano keyboard music written by David Matthews and Peter Sculthorpe, only two of the cues that I created
were ‘scored’ (in the sense of being notated on manuscript paper). These two cues were named ‘Null & Void I’ and ‘Null & Void II’.

Sculthorpe has used my arrangement of the transcribed melody of “The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong” (as found in my “Null & Void” cues) in a number of his subsequent works, including Port Essington for string trio and string orchestra (1977), Djilili for piano (1986) and Kakadu for orchestra (1988). In an interview, Sculthorpe stated that:

\begin{quote}
I love the melody so much that I used it exactly, note for note, as it is, in a number of works since that time. \cite{SculthorpeHughes1998}
\end{quote}

However, a transcription and analysis of the recording of “The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong” made by ethnomusicologist Steven Knopoff, reveals that my transcription is only vaguely approximate in pitch and rhythmic detail when compared to the melody in the Aboriginal recording. In versioning it into something workable in a Western compositional context, the rhythmic subtleties and elaborate vocal filigree of the source song have been ironed out. Knopoff’s 2006 transcription and analysis focused on the ethics of appropriating Aboriginal musical materials into Western musical compositions. Within this framework I believe that the melody, as I transcribed, transformed (and then arranged) it, is an original construction. Indeed, it may be difficult for any viewer/listener of Essington to make a conscious connection between the Aboriginal recording of ‘The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong’ (as heard in the first night-time camp scene) and my transcription of the melody as represented, for example in the ‘Null and Void’ cues.

Two Charles Chauvel films, Uncivilised (1936) and Jedda (1955) use traditional Aboriginal music recordings diegetically but, unlike Essington, the scores have non-diegetic orchestral instrumental textures added to the diegetic Aboriginal recordings as a way of building dramatic tension. Interestingly, in Jedda, the Aboriginal recordings used are credited to ‘Professor Elkin’, the same anthropologist whose field recordings are used in Essington (without credit). The didjeridu, as a non-diegetic musical signifier of Aboriginality, was used in Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) and later films such as The Last Wave (Peter Weir, 1977), Burke and Wills (Graeme Clifford, 1986) and Young Einstein (Yahoo Serious, 1988). Curiously these four films are set in locations where the didjeridu is not traditionally part of the indigenous music. Clearly the power of the didjeridu sound to evoke Aboriginal culture prevailed in the filmmaking process over any concerns for musical authenticity. The adaptation of a theme derived from an Aboriginal song as the basis for an underscore (as deployed in Essington) has not been a practice common in Australian film scoring. The only other example is found in Manganninnie (John Honey, 1980), which was scored by Peter Sculthorpe (with contributions by David Matthews and Ian Fredericks). Although this is a film about the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, Sculthorpe used a traditional song known by the lead actress, Mawuyul Yanthalawuy, who is from Elcho Island (near the coast of Arnhem Land). The song is performed by the character Manganinnie as part of the diegesis, and then developed into a theme for the underscore. The focus of this article is on the particular creative practice of comprovisation in the scoring of the feature film Essington but the material presented also contributes to the literature of music scoring in films dealing with Australian Aboriginal culture.
The *Essington* Underscore

As stated, the underscoring of *Essington* comprised two contrasting approaches. The first used piano music written in a nineteenth century European idiom to accompany those sections of the film which reference the British colonial mindset; and the second used textures constructed by layering mostly improvised piano interior sounds, that is, sounds made by direct contact with the strings and frame of the piano, rather than playing on the keyboard. This latter approach was used for underscoring the dramatic themes of sex, death and violence and is also connected with Macarthur’s obsession with the Aboriginal singing, as well as Squires’s oneness with the environment.

Generally the pieces written for piano in nineteenth century European musical styles accompany scenes that characterise the European-ness of the officers and their families in Port *Essington*, as outlined in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cues</th>
<th>Scenes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Essington</em> theme</td>
<td>the main titles, accompanying a fire in the commandant’s office caused by Sgt. Wright in his attempt to kill a spider with a spirit lamp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lullaby</td>
<td>a sick baby asleep in a British-style cot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mac. 1</td>
<td>Captain Macarthur lying in bed, unable to sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leichhardt March I</td>
<td>the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt’s party arriving on foot at Port <em>Essington</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leichhardt March II</td>
<td>Leichhardt’s departure by ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Cole’s Academy</td>
<td>Mrs Macarthur reminiscing about her geometry studies at her Chelmsford school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tea Party</td>
<td>Captain Macarthur telling a colonial anecdote at a tea party held outdoors in the torrid tropical heat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arietta</td>
<td>Macarthur and his second-in-command, Captain Lambrick, talking nostalgically about their time in Port <em>Essington</em> just as they are about to abandon it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the music handwriting of the piano keyboard scores held in the National Library of Australia, it appears that Sculthorpe wrote the ‘Lullaby’, ‘Mac. 1’ and ‘Miss Cole’s Academy’ cues and that Matthews wrote the remainder of the piano keyboard cues. There is, however, a sketch in Sculthorpe’s handwriting of the short cadenza of the ‘*Essington* theme’, suggesting that he drafted that part of this cue. The piano keyboard music for *Essington* was recorded by session pianist Joyce Hutchinson (uncredited). A military snare drum part was also improvised over the piano tracks of ‘Leichhardt March I’, and ‘Leichhardt March II’ by session drummer Neil Boland (also uncredited).

Extending my approximate transcription of the melody of ‘The whistling duck, *djilili*, swimming in the billabong’, the melody of this song was radically transformed in the piano keyboard cues that Matthews and Sculthorpe scored. In their cues, the theme and its series of variations are intentionally made simple and banal to function in stark contrast with the subtle rhythmic and melodic inflections of the original Aboriginal melody, as a way of asserting that the European claims of cultural superiority in this colonial context are illfounded. However the basic melodic shapes of the piano keyboard cues are inventively arranged in a variety of nineteenth
In one sense improvisation is anathema to film scoring. In the spotting of the music to be used in a synchronised sound era film there is always a starting and an end point for each music cue. There may also be requirements for the synchronisation of the music precisely with certain hit points of the action within a music cue. Considering this standard approach, the idea of an improvised score is problematic and thus not often employed in synch-sound era filmmaking, particularly when large ensembles of musicians are employed to perform the score. The early history of film reveals, however, that live improvised musical accompaniment was common in the presentation of pre-synchronised sound ('silent') films (Whiteoak, 1999: 64-66). In silent film exhibition it was also common to use existing repertoire from hire libraries (including large ensemble works). Another practice was the use by pianists and organists of stock cue books, such as those by Beynon (1921) and Rapee (1925), providing different moods and types of action. Here the performer was free to choose from hundreds of short pieces, which could be adapted (eg lengthened or abbreviated) for different films and screenings. Although the music was fully notated the selection of individual items and their sequencing was improvised.

In the modern era, a certain amount of improvisation occurs in the creative practices of screen composers and their improvising collaborators. In response to the question 'Do you mostly work from improvisation or preconceived musical images?', Magee (1996) found that all ten Australian feature film composers she interviewed used some improvisation in their approach, particularly in devising initial musical ideas to work with particular images. Some composers also identified electronic musical production as lending itself to improvisation, since working in real-time with the musical materials in a multi-track recording environment allows for a much more exploratory approach than scoring directly onto manuscript paper.

Comprovisation and Piano Interior Sound Vocabulary

Bruno Nettl notes that:

_Improvisation and composition are frequently regarded as separate processes, but they also may be viewed as two forms of the same kind of thing.... (1983: 28)_
and that “the extreme forms of both appear at opposite ends of a continuum” (29). In 2006, I first employed the term ‘comprovisation’ to take account of composition that has strong improvisational elements (Hannan, 2006). One comprovisation strategy is to work from a skeletal score and add the compositional details through improvising. Another is to cut up recordings of improvised materials and re-assemble them into new compositions. In all forms of composition and improvisation, a musical vocabulary is established by the practitioner and used as the basis for assembling compositions or improvised performances. The comprovised piano interior cues of Essington involve a vocabulary of unusual sounds and sound patterns made from special features of the instrument. Some techniques are derived from existing works that used extended piano techniques and others are derived from personal experimentation. For example some comprovised cues involve arrangements of the melody that I transcribed from the Aboriginal song ‘The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong’. In these the melody is presented using two types of sounds: plucked strings, a technique that was pioneered by American ‘naïf’ composer Henry Cowell in works such as *Aeolian Harp* for string piano (1923) and *The Banshee* for string piano (1925) (Mellers, 1964: 149-150); and prepared piano, a technique developed by John Cage where objects such as pieces of “wood, glass, rubber and metal” are inserted in the piano strings to create a variety of timbres (ibid: 178). To prepare the piano, I inserted metal screws between the strings of each note at roughly the same distance along the strings. This preserved the pitch relationship between the five tones of the melody (G, A, B, C, D) and produced a buzzy, gong-like timbre.

The melody in these two forms (plucked strings and prepared piano) is the only specifically pitched element in the piano interior cues (apart from accompanying plucked patterns in the scored cues titled ‘Null and Void I’ and ‘Null and Void II’, the second of which is used for the end titles). The other items of musical vocabulary included pitched elements, although they were not adopted for specific pitches but rather improvised randomly to achieve particular textural effects. Nine specific elements are: low- to mid-range clusters made by hitting groups of strings with a metal bar; low booming clusters made by hitting the palm of the hand on a group of low strings; a rapidly repeated tone made by bouncing a wooden pestle on a high string; string glissandi up and down created by moving a finger across a succession of strings while simultaneously depressing different clusters of keys; harmonic glissandi made by scraping a plastic plectrum firmly and rapidly along one or more of the low wound strings; harmonic glissando clusters made by scraping a metal object [in this case a scalpel handle] along a group of low wound strings; high randomly plucked notes; rolls on the lowest strings using timpani sticks; and gong-like low individual tones played with a timpani stick. In addition Aboriginal clap sticks were used in a few of the melody-based cues and a harmonica drone was used in one cue.

These sounds were allocated to the various cues and improvised in layers using multi-track tape recording technology. I use the word ‘improvised’ here because these sounds were performed using free improvisation techniques. The pitches and rhythmic organisation of the clusters, glissandi and rolls, for example, were not predetermined. However they were also far from arbitrary in the sense that free improvisation techniques were used to create a predictable textural result within the context of cues that were scored in detail.

To explain how the comprovised cues of Essington were planned and created, I analyse a cue with reference to documents held in the Essington folder in the NLA,
which includes recording tracking notes (in Sculthorpe’s handwriting) for each of the  
comprovised cues. For the cue ‘Mac. II’, the tracking notes are as follows:

- Track I Piano
- Track II PP at 16
- Track II Gliss at 32 (end of Track I)
- Track IV Roll at 24
- Track V Bass notes from End Track I
- Track VI Plectrum on strings, c.10” from end.

This refers to one of the music cues early in the film. In the scene Macarthur is in his  
office. We hear the opening Essington keyboard piano theme as he sits down at his  
desk, shuffles some documents, and then begins to daydream. After 16 seconds,  
superimposed on the keyboard piano music we hear the prepared piano (PP) version  
of the theme fading in with an accompanying regular beat of clap sticks (as if  
imitating the traditional combination of Aboriginal singing voice and clap sticks). The  
piano keyboard music ends as variable ‘dream-like’ piano string glissandi is added to  
the prepared piano and clap sticks texture, and the music becomes increasingly  
more intense, with multiple textural layers of bass string rolls, bass notes and  
harmonic glissandi (‘plectrum on strings’) being progressively added. On a close-up  
of Macarthur’s face, the piano interior texture builds dynamically as he goes deeper  
into a trance. The music cue ends on an abrupt cut as Macarthur snaps out of his  
trance.

Although tracks III to VI of this cue are un-notated and improvised, the tracking  
notes of this cue (and also of the other piano interior comprovised cues for Essington)  
represent a skeletal form of music scoring. The tracking notes identify the elements  
of each track of the layered texture. They also indicate the timings of the beginnings  
(and the ending in the case of the keyboard piano on Track I) of each element. In  
performing these multi-track passes, I was assisted by Sculthorpe who was with me  
on the studio floor and used a stopwatch to cue me for the entry of each new music  
track in the overdubbing process.

Comprovised Cues Using the Aboriginal Melody Transcription

The ‘Mac. II’ cue described above was one of five cues that reference Macarthur’s  
insomnia problem, his reliance on the Aboriginal music to sleep, and his  
deteriorating mental state. The first (‘Mac. I’) uses a piano keyboard variation of the  
theme to accompany a shot of Macarthur lying in bed, unable to sleep and then  
rising to dress with the intention of visiting the Aboriginal camp. Piano interior  
glisando is added to the piano keyboard recording and the cue ends with heavy tape  
echo applied to the final chord of the variation. For the third cue (‘Mac. III’) when  
Macarthur is given a sedative by the settlement surgeon (Figure 1) and he is drifting  
into sleep (Figure 2), we hear the prepared piano version of the theme with music  
sticks and sharp harmonic glissandi on the wound strings. This then accompanies  
Macarthur’s nightmare in which an Aboriginal group at the campfire is beckoning  
him to come to them (Figure 3) and Namankati is coming towards him with a knife  
(Figure 4). The music intensifies with the addition of bass notes, the plectrum  
scraped on strings, the timpani roll on low strings and the scalpel handle striking the  
strings. The cue ends when Macarthur is stabbed and awakes screaming (Figure 5).  
The cue titled ‘Mac. IV’ is almost identical to ‘Mac. III’ but with the addition of several  
tracks of a drone played on harmonica. As with ‘Mac. II’ it accompanies Macarthur  
getting out of bed to go to the camp. This time, however, he is not welcome there
because he is blamed for the death of Namankati following the stolen harmonica incident.

Figure 1: Essington: Surgeon gives sedative to Captain Macarthur.

Figure 2: Macarthur drifts into sleep.
Figure 3: Macarthur’s nightmare: Aborigines beckon to him.

Figure 4: Namankati stabs Macarthur.
As with the piano keyboard music cues discussed above, this set of compromised cues is based on the theme and variations of it, thus creating links between the narrative content of the scenes where the cues are used and contributing to structural unity, an association articulated by Gorbman (1987: 91).

Three other cues use the transcription of the song ‘The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong’ in its slow and gentle plucked-string form. One of these (titled ‘Cannon Music’) is also related to Macarthur’s sleeping problem. When the Port Essington settlement is abandoned and the ship taking the settlers home is bombarding the buildings with cannon fire, the sound effects of the cannon fire are underscored with a compromised combination of ‘mysterious’-sounding piano string glissandi and low bass tones. The gentle version of the Aboriginal song melody floats in on top of this to accompany a shot of Macarthur sleeping peacefully in a ship’s bunk, oblivious to the deafening cannon fire. The same slower and gentler version of the melody is used for two closely related cues titled ‘Null & Void I’ and ‘Null & Void II’. Unlike the other piano interior cues, I scored these entirely for plucked strings. The gentle version of the Aboriginal melody is accompanied by an ostinato bass-line and other repetitive overdubbed embellishments based entirely in Aeolian mode. Although framing modal music in this manner is a European musical construct, this arrangement of the melody seems more in keeping with the modal qualities of Aboriginal melody than with the harmonic convention of nineteenth century music as represented by the piano keyboard music. As such, it functions as a kind of blending or musical reconciliation between the two musical traditions.

The ‘Null & Void’ cues are associated with Squires. Earlier in the film when the explorer Leichhardt is talking to Squires, he ties a bandanna around Squires’ head and pronounces him “the king of null and void” (representing Leichhardt’s perception of the emptiness of the Australian continent and recognition of Squires’s ease with this environment). The first version of the cue with just the melody and ostinato bass-line accompanies Squires sitting in the commandant’s veranda chair just after the settlement has been abandoned. A more elaborately arranged version is used for the end titles that follow the scene with Squires in the Port Essington town square.

Figure 5: Macarthur wakes up screaming.
looking and speaking directly into the camera with the punchline “I always told those bastards this was my place”.

Comprovised Cues for Death, Sex and Violence

Several themes in the narrative are reinforced by music cues that are entirely comprovised from the piano interior vocabulary listed above. The simple sound of a pestle bouncing on a high string is used for a series of cues associated with death. We first hear it when Captain Lambrick is trying to persuade his wife to take their sick child back to England because half the children in the settlement had died in the previous wet season. It is used again when Squires tries to persuade Mrs Lambrick that she should take her husband’s advice (it is clear he has strong feelings for her). The sound recurs as Squires is summoned by Mrs Lambrick after her child dies (at this point her husband is in denial about the child’s death and refuses to be anywhere near her). Squires is under the misapprehension that Mrs Lambrick desires him but she only wishes to ask him to deliver a message to her husband. After giving the message to Squires, she shoots herself and her blood splatters over him. The bouncing pestle sound linking all these scenes is part of the violent musical texture accompanying her suicide.

Conclusions

Essington highlights the differences between the European and indigenous cultures, a theme also tackled in Jedda and Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971). In Essington, Squires and Macarthur are depicted as sympathetic to the Aboriginal people, suggesting the potential for harmonious co-existence. In framing the music for Essington these cultural contrasts were mirrored first in the diegetic music (Anglo-Celtic folk music and traditional Aboriginal songs) and then in the non-diegetic underscore (piano keyboard music composed in a nineteenth century style and atmospheric piano interior music, some of which adopts the melodic and rhythmic textures of indigenous musical styles). Much of the underscore is composed or comprovised as a set of variations on a melody derived from an Aboriginal song, ‘The whistling duck, djilili, swimming in the billabong’, that features in a diegetic music cue.

The creation of the score was collaborative in two different modes. In the notated mode, David Matthews and Peter Sculthorpe shared the composition of the piano keyboard music cues and I composed the plucked multi-tracked score for the ‘Null & Void’ cues. In the comprovised mode, all three of us planned the tracking and timings of the cues and I improvised the different layers on multi-track tape using a vocabulary of piano interior sounds that I had previously developed as an experimental composer and performer. In addition, in the mixing process, effects such as tape echo and reverb were added to some of these multi-track comprovised cues and the two cues that involve both piano keyboard and piano interior (‘Mac. I’ and ‘Mac. II’).

Although the comprovised cues involve improvised elements, these are principally related to the non-specificity of the notes being played. In other respects, they are like cues that are composed, that is, the length of the cue is set, as are the internal cue points for the entries of the various predetermined sounds on each of the layers of the multi-track tape.
In planning the *Essington* score, various structural threads were determined to create what Gorbman calls the principle of unity:

> Via repetition and variation of musical material and instrumentation, music aids in the construction of formal and narrative unity. (1987: 73)

In *Essington* different sets of variations track the various narrative themes. The piano keyboard cues are emblematic of out-of-place European cultural practices; the comprovised cues involving the prepared piano melody accompany the commandant’s insomnia and progressive derangement. There are also sets of similarly textured comprovised cues that link scenes with related content, that is, themes of death, sex and violence. Through this elaborate web of musical connections we aimed to strengthen and enhance the narrative structure of the film.

The score of *Essington* can be regarded as innovative for several reasons. It used a combination of traditional piano keyboard music with modernist extended techniques for piano, a combination that was rare—if not unique—in the history of feature film synch-sound scoring. Jerry Goldsmith’s score for *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) involved some notable extended piano techniques and Goldsmith had previously incorporated some prepared piano techniques into the score of *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1968). However extended piano techniques had never before dominated a feature film score in the way they did in *Essington*. Even the idea of using solo piano played in a traditional way for multiple cues was not common in sound film underscoring. One example of this practice devised contemporaneously with *Essington* is David S. hire’s score for *The Conversation* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974) that uses only piano music for its non-diegetic cues. There is an interesting connection here with *Essington* since the piano music cues of *The Conversation* are progressively subjected to tape echo manipulation as a device to represent the growing instability of the central protagonist.

Comprovisation as a scoring strategy had rarely—if ever—occurred in Australian sound film before *Essington*, even though improvisation is a technique that many film composers acknowledge as a part of their processes for developing scoring ideas. For *Essington* this process of creating music cues was enabled by newly developed multi-track recording technologies, which allowed for the creation of complex musical textures by overdubbing many layers of different kinds of sounds played by a single performer. This practice was in marked contrast to the usual Hollywood method of recordings scores without the benefit of overdubbing. For example, Goldsmith’s score for *Chinatown* was written for the extremely unusual combination of string orchestra, solo trumpet, four harps and four pianos so that the multi-part textures for harp and piano could be recorded on the sound stage without any overdubbing.

The concert composer in the modernist and post-modernist music era is generally focused on innovative compositional strategies as a way of forging a career through developing a distinctive style or sound in his or her music. Thus it could be argued that composers from a concert or experimental music background who are contracted as screen composers are more likely to try to break with the norms of screen scoring than career screen composers. A notable example is the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu who was prolific in both concert and screen music and employed the modernism and experimentalism of his unique concert music practice (including the blending of Western classical and traditional Japanese instrumentation) in his film scores, to great critical acclaim (Koizumi, 2009). This
offers an alternative to the notion of the dedicated screen composer who employs multiple styles or genres to fulfill the screen music brief.

Having secured the contract for the *Essington* score on the basis of his acknowledged body of concert music, Peter Sculthorpe gained acceptance for a very different kind of score than originally expected. Rather than an orchestral score, he opted for the innovative combination of piano keyboard composition and piano interior comprovisation. By opting for a three-way composition collaboration with other concert composers (David Matthews and myself), opportunities for various scoring approaches were enhanced.

*Essington* remains a significant yet largely overlooked film from the first decade of Australia’s film revival period. While a feature film, *Essington* was devised for the launch of Australian colour television transmissions. This production and exhibition context inevitably enabled a different approach to the creative ideas informing the work. The film’s music is notable as representative of an innovative approach to music track construction for Australian screen production.

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